



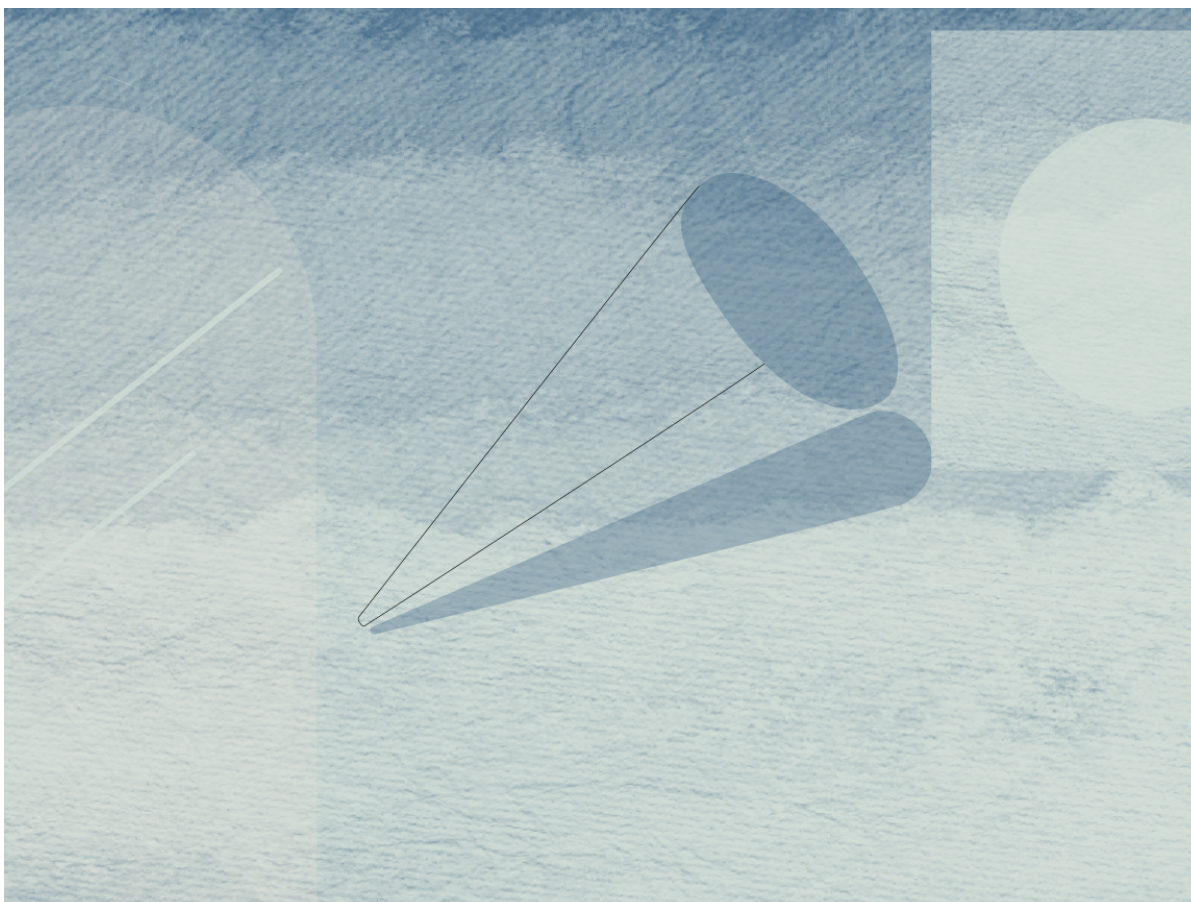
**UNIVERSITY  
OF TURKU**

This is a self-archived – parallel-published version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details. When using please cite the original.

AUTHOR	Kristof Heidemann
TITLE	Citizens' Assemblies as a Tool to Promote Gender Equality
YEAR	2024
DOI	10.5281/zenodo.14409715
VERSION	Publisher's PDF
CITATION	Heidemann, Kristof 2024: Citizens' Assemblies as a Tool to Promote Gender Equality. TALKING RIGHTS 12.12.2024. <a href="https://talkingrights.org/2024/12/12/citizens-assemblies-as-a-tool-to-promote-gender-equality/">https://talkingrights.org/2024/12/12/citizens-assemblies-as-a-tool-to-promote-gender-equality/</a>
LICENSE	CC BY SA

[All Articles](#) [For Authors](#) [Editorial Team](#) [About](#)**TALKING RIGHTS**

A Blog Powered by The Institute for Human Rights at AA

*5 minutes*

## Citizens' Assemblies as a Tool to Promote Gender Equality

12th December 2024

By **Kristof Heidemann**

*"The realization of the equal rights of half our population is the unfinished human rights struggle of this century."* With this remark, UN Secretary-General António Guterres summarised the magnitude of the challenge that

lies ahead for activists fighting against gender discrimination in an era of increasing aggressive global pushback against women's rights. One underappreciated tool that could further this cause are citizens' assemblies (subsequently CA), which are becoming more common around the world in a phenomenon that the OECD has titled the "deliberative wave."

## Gender equality within the human rights framework

The fight against gender discrimination between men and women in human rights law is based on the principle of equality and non-discrimination which lies at the core of human rights law since Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 declared "*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.*" Practically speaking, today the most important frameworks in this area are the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979, the Beijing Platform for Action adopted in 1995, Security Council Resolution 1325 adopted in 2000, and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. On top of that multiple regional human rights frameworks are supplementing this list.

This framework obligates states not only to enact policies of non-discrimination but also to take "*all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the advancement of women,*" among others in the "*political [...] field*" (Art. 3 CEDAW). This article will argue that CAs could be considered such an appropriate measure.

## The problem: gender inequality as an inherent feature of voting systems?

Currently only 26.9 percent of the world's parliamentarians are female, far below their proportion in the population as well as the critical threshold that is required to steer legislation effectively. Once women enter politics, they are statistically doing just as well or even slightly better than their male counterparts in elections, even though they are more likely to face negative stereotypes, sexual harassment, and violence. Conversely, the problem lies rather in that women are less likely to run for office than in that electoral wins are impossible for them. The reasons for this are structural and multifold: for example, women still have to conduct the majority of childcare/household

tasks, are receiving fewer suggestions to run for office, and view the style of modern campaigns (e.g. loss of privacy, soliciting campaign contributions, possibly being forced to engage in a negative campaign) as a bigger deterrent than men.

## The solution? Definition of citizens' assemblies

The concept of citizens' assemblies finds its roots in ancient Athens, where legislative bodies, courts, and councils were composed through a process known as sortition—the random selection of Greek citizens over the age of 30. Contrary to the common modern understanding, Greeks considered the selection of representatives by lot the quintessence of democracy, since they believed voting was prone to lead to an oligarchic rule of the rich.

Within the modern discourse, CAs are defined as gatherings of a demographically representative cross-section of the population, convened to receive expert insights and engage in collective deliberation. These gatherings ultimately produce policy recommendations for government officials, comparable to jury duty as a steady part of criminal and civil trials in many modern democracies.

## The case for citizens' assemblies as a tool for the promotion of gender equality

Since women are proportionately represented in a citizen's assembly, this institution can become a vehicle to let voices of women across the societal spectrum enter the political discourse and advance the struggle against gender discrimination in all forms. It has been shown that the higher the female proportion in a deliberative body, the more likely it is to address issues that are on average of higher propriety for women than for men, e.g. public childcare. Since this could spark the process for policies that address some of the underlying problems for female politicians above, particularly the gender gap in care work, it might in a slowly unfolding self-enforcing cycle bring about greater female representation in the political arena generally. This cycle should be strengthened by the development that once women's voices take a greater hold in the societal discussion, men are more likely to emphasise and hopefully support female perspectives and concerns.

In addition to this, democracy and human rights like gender equality are

interlinked and mutually reinforcing: countries in which women's rights are well safeguarded and the overall level of inclusion and security for them is high, statistically tend to be healthy democracies with fair elections, accountable government institutions, etc. (and vice-versa). In light of this, one should consider measures strengthening democracy as a tool against gender discrimination: CAs are the most widely implemented democratic innovation and have been shown to increase the resilience of democracies and community cohesion, especially when conducted in a precise and careful manner. Therefore, through the democratic enhancement pathway, CAs are also a tool for indirectly supporting women's rights.

In this context, it is also noteworthy that a rise in female representation in politics usually benefits not just women but society overall, given that it is associated with, e.g., a decrease in corruption and human rights violations. Naturally these positive effects could be even further increased if a broader scale of more female voices entered the legislative process not only through an advisory body but through more women arriving into actual positions of power. However, policies that tackle this matter, especially gender quotas, are both legally and politically difficult to implement effectively, while establishing CAs as purely consultative institutions that enjoy broad public support is comparatively easily feasible.

## Conclusion

In conclusion it should be noted that although the fight for equality in positions of power in all three branches of government and every aspect of society must remain the ultimate objective to truly fulfill the promise of the human rights framework, CAs should be seen as a relevant intermediate step on this path that will accelerate the achievement of the end goal along the way.

**Kristof Heidemann** *is a doctoral researcher at the faculty of law of the University of Turku, Finland.*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14409715>

[citizens](#), [citizens assemblies](#), [citizens assembly](#), [democracy](#), [gender inequality](#), [human rights](#), [Kristof Heidemann](#), [voting](#)

[Contact form](#)

[talkingrights@abo.fi](mailto:talkingrights@abo.fi)



Website designed in collaboration with Visual Designer [Bethlehem Burka](#)

*This blog is made possible by funding from the  
Open Science mini projects at Åbo Akademi University*